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SUBJECT Robert Gates' Confirmation Hearings

DAN RATHER: Will the United States Senate approve CIA Director William Casey's handpicked successor, now President Reagan's official nominee, Robert Gates? Senate confirmation hearings began today, and Gates faced repeated questioning about his role in the weapons-to-Iran fiasco.

CBS News Capitol Hill correspondent Phil Jones was there.

PHIL JONES: Gates, who has been Deputy Director of the CIA for the past 4 1/2 years, repeatedly mentioned the January 1986 order by the President that Congress not be told about the Iran arms dealing.

ROBERT GATES: I also believe that CIA made an error in not pressing to reverse the directive to withhold prior notification once the operation began to string out, after mid-February 1986.

JONES: Gates said he would contemplate resigning if a President ever overruled his recommendations in the future to notify Congress. That qualified promise brought Gates under immediate fire.

SENATOR BILL BRADLEY: Contemplate? Why wouldn't, without question, you resign?

GATES: The point at which I would contemplate resignation would be the point at which I made the judgment that the withholding had reached the point where it threatened that trust.

JONES: Gates conceded that he first heard speculation

that arms profits may have been diverted to the Contras in early October 1986, but that he didn't come to Congress because:

GATES: I regarded what little information I had as worrisome, but extraordinarily flimsy.

JONES: Gates got into further trouble when he said he had not viewed the National Security Council as an intelligence organization.

GATES: Senator, it seemed to me that the activity that they were undertaking was primarily a diplomatic initiative, for which we were providing operational support.

SENATOR SAM NUNN: Sending guns to Iran, and ammunition and TOW missiles, is a diplomatic activity? The State Department's going to have to get a different kind of uniform if that's the case.

JONES: Even those trying to help Gates get confirmed were exasperated at points today. Senator Cohen suggested that the reason Gates had not questioned the Iran operation more was because he was an ambitious young man who didn't want to rock the boat.

SENATOR WILLIAM COHEN: You basically -- I mean as a practical matter -- were not prepared to resign over a matter that you didn't create, initiate, fully understand the details, nor wanted to know the details. Isn't that essentially it?

GATES: While this was a risky operation, there was no reason to quarrel with it.

SENATOR COHEN: Wait. Stop. Stop. Of course there were reasons to quarrel with it.

JONES: Gates will be back tomorrow. But his answers today clearly left some senators concerned over just how open he would be with Congress if confirmed as CIA Director.